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# The 'Wazirganj Terror Attack': Sectarian Conflict and the Middle Classes

Raphael Susewind

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- 1 Scholars of intergroup conflict in India, particularly those studying Hindu-Muslim riots and anti-Muslim pogroms, have long argued that attackers and their masterminds incite violence for electoral and economic gain and later mask their instrumental calculations in religious idioms (Wilkinson 2005). This argument has most forcefully been developed by Brass (2006: 15), who divides the production of Hindu-Muslim violence in contemporary India into three phases: (1) preparation/rehearsal, (2) activation/enactment, and (3) explanation/interpretation. Brass (2006: 18) draws attention to the cyclic 'relationship between the immediate acts that precipitate riots and the 'underlying causes' that make it possible for such acts to be followed by large-scale crowd violence' and argues that this vicious circle becomes organised in 'institutional riot systems,' in which 'conversion specialists,' who are well versed in instrumental calculations, 'decide when a trivial, everyday incident will be exaggerated and placed into the communal system of talk, the communal discourse, and allowed to escalate into communal violence' (Brass 2006: 32). Consequently, 'riots persist because they are functionally useful to a wide array of individuals, groups, parties, and the state authorities,' but this usefulness is sustained because of a 'discourse of Hindu-Muslim communalism that has corrupted history, penetrated memory, and contributes in the present to the production and perpetuation of communal violence in the country' (Brass 2006: 33).

- 2 Initially in a similar mode, this paper examines both an immediate act and the underlying causes that enabled its escalation. It explains how a local business rivalry between Sunni and Shi'a real estate developers in Lucknow went awry, leading to an attack on a Shi'a *majlis* (religious assembly) in the inner-city neighbourhood of Wazirganj. Yet, unlike other instrumentalist studies of intergroup violence, I explore what happens when attackers' calculations turn out to be miscalculations, thus questioning Brass's notion of 'institutionalisation.' The Sunni attackers in Wazirganj apparently wanted to eliminate a business rival and dampen growing Shi'a economic and political assertion, which fits instrumentalist assumptions. They did not, however, anticipate that their actions would escalate to state-level politics and spiral so much out of their control as to temporarily send them to jail. Their miscalculation demonstrates that the vicious circle of rehearsal, enactment, and interpretation is no quasi-mechanic automatism. Rather, it is a more complex phenomenon, in which creative agency and the entanglement of specific events with broader social change play an important role (as Brass would likely agree). In the case of the 'Wazirganj Terror Attack,' as the event soon became known, a distinctly Muslim version of 'middle class moralities' (Saavala 2010: title) took on sectarian overtones and began to challenge the established clerical hierarchy. Besides immediate instrumental calculations, this paper thus also unpacks the cultural changes accompanying upward social mobility.
- 3 Most academic studies of intergroup violence in India and the role of social mobility therein have concentrated on the political and economic incentives for violence. This paper complements that argument with close attention to the shifting 'moral registers' (Schielke 2009a, 2009b) of the emerging middle classes and thereby links those political and economic incentives to the wider cultural undercurrents of social change. With an emphasis on morality, I wish to highlight that 'middle class' is no neutral economic category delineated by economic aspirations and perhaps achievements, but primarily an emic marker in which both those who belong and those who don't invest meaning and moral judgment. Indeed, I intend to show that it is precisely their moral projects that deeply implicate the middle classes in the violence that they outwardly reject. Self-identified middle class families in Wazirganj—Shi'a, Sunni and non-Muslim alike—discursively construct themselves as the guardians of propriety, as the 'clean' and utopian counterforce to both 'corrupt' and 'criminal' political and economic elites on the one hand and the allegedly 'unruly' population of poor people on the other (Donner & de Neve 2011, Saavala 2010; Liechty 2003). Furthermore, their self-understanding goes beyond rhetoric in that it is underpinned by iconic practices such as conspicuous consumption and related practices of fashioning the 'proper' self. Importantly, the intersection of class with other social categories also easily results in exclusionary political projects. This argument is not entirely new (see, for Lucknow, Gooptu 2001 and Jones 2012 and see, more generally, Corbridge & Harriss 2000); however, as many of my conversations with people in Lucknow have suggested, the disassociation of the middle classes from 'dirty politics,' and more specifically from sectarian violence remains a prominent idea in popular imagination.
- 4 My argument is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Wazirganj over a 16-month period just prior to the 'Wazirganj Terror Attack' and during a one-month follow-up visit conducted one year later. During these visits, I spoke with most of the people involved on either side (one of the attackers was my Badminton partner a year earlier, and I sipped many cups of tea with one of his victims) and with the administration, police,

and clerical establishment. Although I was not present at the *majlis* that was attacked, I had previously observed similar assemblies addressed by the same orator in the same venue, examined official documents pertaining to the attack, and conducted extensive participant and non-participant observation in the neighbourhood before and after the incident.

- 5 The paper first introduces the Lucknow and Wazirganj social context and reconstructs the attack using eyewitness accounts, press reports, and official documents. Then, it discusses some of the straightforward political and economic calculations that arguably motivated the attackers. These motivations can explain the event itself but they cannot address the rapid escalation that immediately followed it. The discursive significance and political impact of the 'Wazirganj Terror Attack' can only be understood in light of contentious projects of religious reform and an emerging middle class morality, which are the focus of the second part of this paper. That section proposes that two conflicts came to overlap in one incident: (1) the direct business rivalry between a Shi'a and a Sunni real estate developer and (2) the indirect conflict between established and emerging Shi'a clerics over morality in modern times. The attackers' instrumental calculations were miscalculations because they were ignorant of the latter conflict, as became evident when the local incident spiralled out of their control. The paper concludes with a discussion of two implications of this analysis for the study of intergroup violence in contemporary India more broadly: (1) intragroup contestation often underlies intergroup conflict, and (2) instrumental calculations are fallible in lived practice even if they appear stringent in retrospect.

## Contemporary Lucknow

- 6 Contemporary Lucknow can be a strange place: It is neither a market town nor quite a metropolis; it feels at once melancholic and vibrant, genteel and abrasive. Lucknow is the capital of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous and politically influential, yet economically struggling, state. As a city of historical importance, this spiritual centre of sub-continental Shi'ism boasts centuries of cosmopolitan exchange with the Persian world. Consequently, Lucknow is the only city in India, apart from perhaps Hyderabad, where Shi'a are politically and socially influential. Its colonial rulers, the Nawabs and Taluqedars of Awadh, lavishly spent whatever they earned from British colonial purses on poets and craftsmen, erotic pursuits, and culinary refinement (Sharar 1975). Self-identified proper Lucknowites, usually men with elitist pasts, elitist aspirations, or both, still despise paid work. Every year, the old city grinds to a halt during Muharram and Safar, the two months of Shi'a ritual mourning when no business can be conducted, no engagements can be agreed upon, no children can be named, and no parties can be arranged. However, plenty of these activities happen under the carpet, contrived over cups of Kashmiri *chai* before or after religious gatherings when rich and famous clerics stop by for a chat and a deal.
- 7 Many residents of the old city enjoy recounting Lucknow's glorious past to visitors, at times in a smugly ironic performance of self-exotification. However, one cannot deny that this Lucknow of gardens and palaces is in decline, if it ever did exist for a broader population (see Jones in this volume). In 1857, the city was the centre of what the British termed the Great Mutiny and what many Indians today refer to as their First War of Independence (Llewellyn-Jones 1985). Colonial purses were stowed and traded for

imperial canes and carbines (Oldenburg 1984). Since the early 20th century, several waves of heavy immigration reshaped the face of the city (Majumdar 2004) and independent India's land reforms cemented the elite's financial decay. While the city always oscillated between grandeur and melancholy, undoubtedly influenced by popular Shi'a piety and its emphasis on ritual mourning, melancholy ultimately became pervasive. To complicate matters, since the 1980s, Uttar Pradesh has been the grand stage for lower caste politics in India, a scenario in which Dalits and Other Backward Classes profit and many Muslims feel excluded (Jaffrelot 2003, Jaffrelot & Gayer 2012, see also Lee in this volume). Old Lucknow largely keeps its distance from state-level politics, proud to host big leaders but quick to point out that such 'uncivilised' people do not truly belong there (Graff 1997). The sense that what remains is 'just another provincial town, with little opportunities, few jobs, and fewer women still' was particularly apparent in the attitudes of my younger informants. At first glance, little seems to be happening in this place where everything of relevance allegedly happened long ago.

- 8 Yet, interestingly, expressions of Lucknow's famous melancholy rarely feel melancholic. Although outwardly looking back and claiming heartbreak over the city's decay, most people are quite busy looking forward and carving out opportunities in the new order. Whereas traditional crafts such as *Chickan* embroidery are in decline (Wilkinson-Weber 1999) and positions in the burgeoning bureaucracy rarely go to Muslims (Sachar *et al.* 2006), a new Muslim middle class is emerging on the fringes of the old city, largely unmentioned in people's popular perceptions of Lucknow. In sections of the old city where many Muslims (Sunni and Shi'a alike) are highly successful, a veritable real estate boom is in progress because of perceptions that a proper 'flat' (a dwelling or apartment always spoken of in English) is an important, although ambivalent, indicator of middle class life (Guiu Searle 2014, Donner, forthcoming, Susewind, forthcoming). This real estate boom propels a virtuous circle of upward social mobility and further tilts the economic and political balance away from the former aristocratic elites.
- 9 Religious change is as palpable as the economic and political transformations in Lucknow and a number of aspiring young *ulema* (clerics) propagate an individualistic morality for the emerging middle classes (a fresh take on earlier reinventions of their role; Jones 2012, Joshi 2001). Many people find it difficult to adjust to the *ulema's* rigid demands, some people find strength and solace in them, and others simply earn a fortune from spreading checklists of religious do's and don'ts. Indeed, whoever wants to make money in old Lucknow today either enters a shady world of builders and developers parcelling and selling off the estates of the impoverished elite in collusion with local goons, politicians, and city officials or works for one of the mushrooming religious cable television channels or sectarian social media platforms. Frequently, a person does both, and more, by letting one brother contest local elections and asking another to run the declining family workshop.
- 10 Wazirganj, a mixed neighbourhood that is squeezed between the old and the new cities, is in the midst of this imbroglio, and it is where I lived and worked for 17 months. Formerly the leafy home of the *wazirs*, or ministers, of Avadh's rulers, the neighbourhood's demography changed drastically in the aftermath of 1857. While a handful formerly aristocratic families remain, retaining nostalgic memories of the past, contemporary Wazirganj is very much a crowded popular area on the brink of becoming middle class, representative of the wider changes described above. About half of its population is Muslim, divided into one-third Shi'a and two-thirds Sunni. The Shi'a have grown in

numbers and economic strength but the Sunni dominate local politics. Even though real estate developers have recently invested money in the neighbourhood, the benefits of social change are unevenly distributed along sectarian lines, which has led to increasing tensions between successful Shi'a and powerful Sunnis. Last, but not least, Wazirganj is highly political turf. It is the home of Christian College, where many young politicians start their careers—mostly Muslims and Hindus despite the College's colonial-era designation. Christian College is adjacent to Balrampur Hospital, where criminal legislators go to escape the hardships of jail. The hospital is supported by a micro-economy of assistants and small-scale political entrepreneurs, most of whom are Sunni Muslim or Hindu cowherds close to the ruling Samajwadi Party—and locally known to enforce their will by violent means if necessary (Michelutti & Heath 2012).

- 11 Indeed, violence between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims increased during the 20th century and there was a series of sectarian riots in the old city that continue intermittently today. Importantly, the use of the term 'sectarian' in this paper is based on the prevalent emic descriptions of Shi'a-Sunni contestation, but I do not propose such contestations are essentially about minute *maslaki* (school of thought) differences between them. To the contrary, 'sectarianism became a means by which a Shi'a community was defined, negotiated and presented, an alternative framework for collective modernization' (Jones 2012: 230). Several authors have described this process of community formation as being essentially similar to Hindu-Muslim communal agitation (Cole 1988, Freitag 1990). Similar to the way that Hindu-Muslim conflicts often emerge from intra-Hindu disagreements about what it means to be Hindu in contemporary times, 'Shia-Sunni arguments . . . were in fact frequently something of a smokescreen for competition, or even conflict, within Shiism itself [so that] the 'other' was primarily a stylistic mechanism, by which particular dynamics of change internal to Shiism could be facilitated' (Jones 2012: 231). I agree with this argument and endeavour in this paper to demonstrate that the miscalculations that led to the escalation of the 'Wazirganj Terror Attack' came about mostly because of the Sunni attackers' ignorance of intra-Shi'a clerical politics.

## The 'Wazirganj Terror Attack'

- 12 In recent years, a group of aspiring Shi'a real estate developers has begun to revitalise the observance of Muharram, the Shi'a month of ritual mourning, in the neighbourhood. Over the past few years, they have invited Maulana Abid Bilgrami, a successful businessman turned cleric, to address the local youth in a one-week series of *majalis* (religious assemblies). The size of the gathering has grown each year and it has been particularly attractive to the emerging local middle classes. In 2013, it was so popular that the local Sunni strongman, municipal corporator, and self-styled guardian of the poor, named 'Nammu,' issued an ultimatum to stop Bilgrami's *majalis* because he considered them a public nuisance. The organisers refused to back off, the resulting tension was palpable, and, as Bilgrami was finishing his talk on 16 January 2013, somebody cut the electricity.
- 13 As soon as 'Doctor,' one of the organisers, stepped out from the venue to find out what was happening, he found Nammu at the front door and a heated argument ensued. Who drew his pistol first remains unclear (police reports state that they both were armed); but, in the midst of their dispute, several attackers opened fire at the swelling crowd from a dark corner across the street. About fifteen minutes later, the District Magistrate

arrived with a heavy police presence just as three injured people, including Doctor, were rushed to hospital. Police officers were busy dispersing the Sunni crowd and arranging for the safe passage of the Shi'a from the place of attack when the news broke that a Hindu bystander, apparently mistaken for one of the original attackers, had been murdered in a side alley. Simultaneously, one of the injured people (Doctor's close and trusted assistant) was declared dead on arrival at the hospital, where a large crowd, led by Maulana Kalbe Jawwad (the most prominent Shi'a cleric in Lucknow), had already formed in protest.

- 14 At this point, the focus of events expanded from Wazirganj to the old city at large. To pacify the crowd that had gathered in front of the hospital, the authorities promised to immediately arrest Nammu and his family members, who had fled the scene. Indeed, police captured one of his brothers early the next morning and put him to jail for two weeks, a circumstance unheard of in the history of that family's hold over the neighbourhood. Meanwhile, throughout the night, stone pelting was occasionally reported. In the early morning hours after the attack, the District Magistrate tried to negotiate to obtain a quiet funeral for the victims to avoid further tension. However, Maulana Kalbe Jawwad's major clerical rival foiled his plan by using one of the dead bodies to block a heavily trafficked road through the old city and then demanding the immediate arrest of the absconding Nammu and his cousin, who was a former Member of Parliament (MP). When rumours flew that another Shi'a had been stabbed in the old city, a Sunni rickshaw driver who was there at the edge of the roadblock became the victim of a revenge attack. The police then cane-charged the protesters, dispersed the crowd, and unilaterally took the dead bodies to a nearby graveyard, which triggered another wave of protest.
- 15 Latest then, the 'Wazirganj Terror Attack' began to impact state-level politics. Four First Informal Reports had already been lodged at the Wazirganj police station by the victims' relatives, a co-organiser of the *majlis*, and by prominent Shia citizens. They named, among others, Nammu, his arrested brother, and their MP cousin as the attackers. Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav, his father and Samajwadi Party supremo, Mulayam Singh Yadav, became personally involved and assured Maulana Kalbe Jawwad that more arrests would follow.
- 16 The next morning, barely 48 hours after the attack, the state government announced that the families of the victims would be compensated five *lakh* rupees (roughly five times the annual per capita income in urban Uttar Pradesh) and that there also would be payments to those who had been injured. Nammu was briefly arrested but he was quickly cleared of all of the charges in a report hastily drafted by a police officer newly transferred to Wazirganj station. Two weeks later, Nammu's brother left jail on bail as well, which prompted large demonstrations in the old city and a request to transfer the enquiry from the local police to a Special Investigation Team (SIT) of the Anti-Terrorism Squad. The SIT was indeed formed but it has not yet submitted its report. The Superintendent of Police was promptly transferred out of Lucknow the day after he announced that stern action would be taken.
- 17 The attack also caused a rather exceptional, albeit short-lived, unity among Lucknow's notoriously infighting Shi'a clerics under the leadership of Maulana Kalbe Jawwad. Later, a Sunni procession was attacked during Ramadan in retaliation, a first in Lucknow's long history of sectarian clashes, and when I returned to the city 10 months after that attack to ascertain what exactly was going on there, police pickets were still guarding sensitive

street corners in Wazirganj. My Shi'a and Sunni contacts, including family members of victims, attackers, and sources in the administration and police, confirmed what I had gleaned from afar: the whole episode had quickly moved to higher political ground than that on which those who were initially involved were standing and any prior instrumental calculations by the attackers soon became irrelevant because a much larger machinery sprang into action.

## Politics and political economy

- 18 In short: the sectarian politics of identity and belonging that have come to be seen as synonymous with contemporary Shi'a-Sunni relations in Lucknow seemed to have, once again, escalated out of control. The movement from the alleged decay of a *tehzeebi* (civilised) past into a violently sectarian future is the theme of many folktales about Lucknow. The former elites often blame the so-called uncivilised, lower class Sunni migrants, so the initial interpretation of the sequence of events in Lucknow itself was foreseeable. The Shi'a wing of the Urdu press and many sectarian online platforms quickly chose to frame the event as a 'terror attack just like targeted killings [that have] taken place in Pakistan [and] Syria' (lucknowshianews.com, 19 January 2013). The Hindi press also published articles about 'sectarian clashes' and speculated about the potential electoral motives of the attackers. The dominant perspective in the Indian English language press was that a business rivalry had become violent, again suggesting potential electoral motivation. The latter interpretation reflects the dominant scholarly perspectives on intergroup violence in India that tend to deconstruct the shifting forms of religious belonging and try to explain violence through presumably hard political calculations for economic gain (Brass 2006, Varshney 2002, Wilkinson 2005).
- 19 That the Wazirganj incident might have been part of an electoral gamble and, more specifically, an attempt to divide the so-called Muslim vote along sectarian lines had already been discussed in Shi'a circles and in the wider community. At a large meeting of Shi'a clerics on 4 February 2013, Maulana Kalbe Jawwad hinted at a political conspiracy when he pointed out that, 'political parties which [attempt to] foment trouble [that they] should not underestimate the [electoral] strength of Shi'as, for also many Hindus, Sunnis, Sikhs, Christians were *azadars* [mourners].' In other words, observers of Muharram would not accept attacks on *majalis* lightly and retaliate at the ballot box. Barely 24 hours after the incident, one of Jawwad's confidants posted the following online comment:
- We should consider that just as [Lalji] Tandon [Lucknow's powerful BJP leader] announced that [Narendra] Modi [the controversial chief minister of Gujarat, and now India's Prime Minister] will fight elections from [a seat in] Lucknow, on the very same day . . . preparations began to destroy the unity of Sunni and Shi'a [displayed in the assembly elections] so that the BJP would win at the time of elections as always. One more important issue is that one idiot Shi'a leader and 15–20 boys with him performed *tabarra* [curses against Sunnis] yesterday night at the Trauma Centre and demolished a number of cars in nearby alleys. This is also part of this attempt to incite disunity. In this way, one group of Yazidis is paid well from Tandon's pocket and throws oil in the fire. The command over both groups is in the hands of one man. (lucknowshianews.com, 18 January 2013)
- 20 Unfortunately, these allegations can be neither proven nor disproven. Lalji Tandon naturally denies his involvement and, even if we knew them, sectarian voting patterns

cannot be linked to specific causes on the flimsy basis of temporal coincidence. There are, however, good theoretical arguments that explain why, at least in this instance, electoral calculations are an unconvincing explanation of sectarian violence. In January 2013, the general elections were more than a year away and any strategy following a crude 'divide and rule' logic would be ill-timed; an attack during the following Muharram would have been much more effective. Moreover, when the elections took place, Muslims in Wazirganj voted similarly to those in Lucknow at large by generally supporting the Congress (Susewind & Dhattiwala 2014), which had never had an investment in the conflict between Nammu and Doctor.

- 21 Elections to the state assembly and municipality in turn were held months before the attack, in which Nammu and his family were highly successful, rendering a revenge attack from their side unnecessary. Indeed, in the assembly elections, Wazirganj was one of the few areas in old Lucknow where Muslims rejected the Samajwadi Party's sweeping victory elsewhere, no doubt because Nammu had campaigned for the incumbent Bahujan Samaj Party. In the local elections that were held shortly thereafter, Nammu's powerful grip on the neighbourhood led Wazirganj to be the only municipal ward that went to a candidate uncontested for the second consecutive time. That candidate was Nammu's wife. To ensure that nothing unforeseen would happen, family members also controlled the local polling booth on election day with no apparent opposition from the police. Nammu's brother, who later went to jail for the attack on Bilgrami's *majlis*, boasted to have voted 'at least 15 times' when I met him by noon, and even half-jokingly invited me (the foreign researcher) to cast a few votes in his sister-in-law's favour (which I politely declined). In sum, inciting sectarian tension for electoral gain was unnecessary at the local level and premature at the national level.
- 22 However, politics might enter in a different way. Nammu and Doctor were both involved in real estate, which is a sector that is believed to deeply influence election financing (Kapur & Vaishnav 2011) and is a major playground for *goonda* (strongman) politics (Michelutti 2010). Moreover, Imambara Deputy Sahib (the place of the attack) is located on prime *waqf* (religious endowment) land. Before Doctor and the group of aspiring Shi'a developers around him began to invigorate Muharram observance in Wazirganj, the Imambara had almost ceased to function and had already been encroached upon by Nammu and his associates. However, now that the place had returned to its original use, further deals would require the approval of Shi'a developers. Through his spiritual activism, Doctor had therefore conveniently secured a share of the lucrative business, circumventing the otherwise greater numerical strength and political power of his Sunni competitors. During my last visit, it was indeed rumoured that Doctor had arranged a land deal with some members of Nammu's family but that all of them fell out with each other shortly before the attack on the *majlis*.
- 23 How could a piece of land in old Lucknow have become so precious as to warrant murder? To understand this, we need to detour into a discussion of the political economy of real estate. A century ago, 'a third of the members of the Municipal Board were 'contractors' . . . and clearly both the Board and the Improvement Trust were seen by many members as a means of furthering personal, family and clique interests' (Reeves 1997: 218). The city has been expanding since then and many municipal corporators are still involved in real estate. However, apart from a few large landowners, Muslims have benefited little from urban growth. With the exception of a few old Muslim villages now enclosed by modern suburbs, new Lucknow has become almost exclusively non-Muslim (see Susewind &

Taylor in this volume). This outcome can be attributed to a political economy of bureaucratic collusion that creates economic incentives for Muslims to invest in the old city: in the old city, Muslim developers enjoy closer social proximity to bureaucrats than non-Muslims, possess greater electoral strength, and exert clerical control over religious endowments, all of which translates into lower bribe levels and thus higher profit margins (Susewind, forthcoming). Higher margins in turn contribute to a distinctly Muslim, yet increasingly crowded, market segment in the old city, in which relatively larger profit margins attract an increasing number of players.

- 24 In Wazirganj, Nammu and his family have long dominated this lucrative market. However, their former Shi'a contractors (Doctor and others) have recently made enough money to become developers in their own right. They still cannot politically compete with Nammu, but they are increasingly important economic competition in the scramble to provide flats to the aspiring middle classes. The competition with Doctor over *waqf* land might have been a warning sign for Nammu that his competition was attempting to gain independence. Was this a potential motive for the attack? Locally it was common knowledge that Nammu and his family used violence to protect their interests and that they had escaped punishment in the past. Nammu may have attempted to kill two birds with one stone by eliminating a major business rival while weakening the rising Shi'a assertiveness in his neighbourhood. Thus, he may have been motivated to attack Doctor immediately following the *majlis* rather than in a more private setting. Apparently, however, Nammu and his family grossly miscalculated their freedom to do as they chose because the events rapidly escalated. The escalation suggests an underexplored aspect in the research literature on inter-group violence in India: instrumental calculations might well lie behind incidents such as the 'Wazirganj Terror Attack'—but what if they turn out to be miscalculations?

## Middle class morality

- 25 Power shifts in the public sphere, corrupt markets and Shi'a-Sunni competition for upward social mobility set the context for the 'Wazirganj Terror Attack' and reveal some of the material incentives and restraints under which it occurred. However, these conditions cannot fully explain why a business rivalry developed such violent momentum. To understand this escalation, one has to move beyond the individuals' immediate instrumental calculations and examine long-term social changes unfolding in the neighbourhood and the accompanying intra-Shi'a (clerical) politics. Nammu's ignorance, as a Sunni, of these developments led him to seriously misjudge the impacts of his actions, a misjudgement that almost sent him to jail for a long time despite his considerable political clout.
- 26 For instance, Nammu did not know that he and his family were not the only ones annoyed at Doctor and his group. Maulana Kalbe Jawwad had a different axe to grind. Consequently, two conflicts came to overlap in space and time. There was the immediate one between Nammu and Doctor and there was a more subtle and long-term one that simmers in Lucknow's Shi'a clerical landscape and reflects the wider social and moral transformations of urban North India. On the one hand, Jawwad, had complicated interests in *waqf* administration himself. More importantly, however, he was increasingly under pressure from young and energetic clerics (such as Maulana Abid Bilgrami, who had been invited to Wazirganj by Doctor) who bring a different tonality and a different

political project to the moral registers (Schielke 2009a, 2009b) of Shi'a belonging. They particularly strike a chord with the new Shi'a middle classes, whose allegiance consequently threatens to slip away from the clerical establishment. Therefore, the attack on Bilgrami's *majlis* was a perfect opportunity for Jawwad to reassert his supremacy by rendering a local issue into a large-scale sectarian confrontation.

- 27 This section thus shifts to an analysis of Bilgrami's theological project to explain the reasons that he became a threat to the clerical hierarchy as well as to the neighbourhood's poor, most of whom happen to be Sunni. I argue that the cultural undercurrents of social change (exemplified by Bilgrami) ultimately explain why the relatively better established Shi'a clerics attempted to gain control of the protests against the 'Wazirganj Terror Attack,' and, by extension, the rapid escalation of the issue to the level of state politics. Similarly, the discursive significance that the attack acquired in this process points to factors beyond the immediate instrumental calculations of Nammu and his family—they may have wanted to get rid of Doctor, but surely not become associated with 'terror.' This turn to the attacked assembly itself should not imply that the victims were in any way responsible for what happened to them—but help us to better understand the limits of instrumentalist explanations of group violence.
- 28 What is so special about Maulana Abid Bilgrami? When I first heard one of his *majalis* in Wazirganj one year before the attack, I was particularly struck by his rhetoric. He spoke mostly in plain, colloquial Hindustani rather than the fairly stylised Urdu that one commonly hears in Lucknow. He frequently inserted key terms or short phrases in English, mirroring the linguistic practices of his largely lower-middle class audience. This class tends to use select English nouns in their vernacular sentences, often to signal their aspirations to participate in 'Shining India,' and perhaps also in some imagination of a globalised modernity.
- 29 What Bilgrami said was just as interesting as his language and word choices and it was indicative of middle class aspirations. Bilgrami avoided narrating the painful history of Kerbala or engaging in a polemic portrayal of world politics, which is common among clerics in Lucknow. Instead, he mostly took on the minutiae of individual practices, especially public practices or those that are otherwise particularly visible to the public. For example, the *majlis* that I attended began with a customary acknowledgement of the piety of those who invited him. But, Bilgrami immediately reminded his audience that *akhlaq* (everyday behaviour) was at least as important as ritual observance. In Wazirganj, Bilgrami cautioned people not post pictures on Facebook, but if they did (as a male), to make sure that they grew a beard first. Similarly, he exhorted his audience to avoid 'mixed gatherings' of boys and girls and called for greater respect for the dignity and equality of men and women (in their respective roles). He asked us to stop listening to popular music and to dress 'suitably' in modern fashion yet he allowed *marziya* (devotional music) and loose-fitting jeans. In all these examples, Bilgrami carefully carved out 'the delicate balance between not-too-much and not-too-little, between the vulgarity of the poor and the vulgarity of the rich, [which] is endlessly negotiated in middle class discourses of 'suitability' (Liechty 2003: 256).
- 30 Bilgrami's emphasis on the everyday and mundane kept his audience engaged long beyond the official end of his *majlis*. Most of the people paid close attention throughout, although a few continued to use their mobile phones and one friend even updated his Facebook status during the talk, posting, 'Maulana Bilgrami: don't use fb [Facebook]' to silent giggles in the back row. However, despite subversive acts such as this, almost no

one left before the end. Bilgrami hit a nerve. After he concluded the day's program with a short round of *matam* (ritual chest-beating), one of the organisers and friends of Doctor stormed up to me and commented how useful he had found the detailed guidance that Bilgrami provided, particularly for the many 'youth' (a term used exclusively in English by both the organiser and Bilgrami) in the audience. Other short conversations that I had as people trickled out into the night expressed similar sentiments.

- 31 To flesh out the theological reasoning behind Bilgrami's insistence on the primacy of *akhlaq* (everyday behaviour), I bought a video (VCD) recording of the complete *How to help our Imam* series, based on its initial delivery at Khoja Masjid in Mumbai. It was sold in Lucknow's bazaars one year later. The cycle consists of eight *majalis*, each about 45 minutes long, the penultimate of which I had witnessed in Wazirganj. This is the series' opening statement,

My *topic* for this whole *Ashura* is the help/victory of the Imam—that is, *how to help our Imam*—which is the most important aspect of Muharram. After all, Muharram is not the term for an *activity*, Muharram is not a *culture* of ours—Muharram is a prime opportunity for introspection for Shi'a. We might not have engaged in introspection our whole lives, we might not have thought about how we can assist the Imam for the whole year, but this is the perfect opportunity, this is the time that our neighbourhood can formulate their complaints and requests and can jointly help those of Kerbala. So pay attention, friends, for this is an opportunity for everybody, everybody can grab it, *everybody will get the chance!* (VCD 1, 1:15, emphasis in original)

- 32 Bilgrami again skilfully used English language words at key points. Indeed, the very first words that he spoke were '*meri topic ye hai ki*' ('my *topic* is the following'), which is his trademark formulation that encapsulates the essence of his distinct style, quoted verbatim by most of the people who I asked about his *majalis*. The fact that he explicitly constructed the cycle as a series of lectures under a unifying topic rather than according to the events of Kerbala is another significant innovation. Although few orators refrain from contemporary commentary, equally few would use this commentary as the organising principle of their *majalis*, and the denunciation of a cultural understanding of Muharram is highly significant in *tehzeebi* Lucknow. Finally, his introduction concludes with the exclamation that 'everybody will get the chance!' (*i.e.* the chance for introspection and reform), a promise that he made like a motivational speaker at a stereotypical marketing seminar, completely abandoning traditional rhetoric.
- 33 Many of my interviewees, particularly the young adults, said that the universalism in the address and the fleeting casual mention of women's education mark Bilgrami as particularly 'modern' and 'progressive.' Similar to other contemporary 'modernists' or 'reformers' (Osella & Osella 2007, 2013), Bilgrami 'place[s] the responsibility of fashioning Islamic society on each individual Muslim' (Robinson 2007: 177).
- 34 However, Bilgrami also goes a step further because the Islamic society imagined here is clearly middle class with complicated, and often ambivalent, desires to become 'suitably modern' (Liechty 2003: title). Dress codes and Facebook are just the beginning and subsequent *majalis* guide the audience to the proper use of mobile phones, how to live a suitably Islamic life in a nuclear family with a 'job,' in a 'company,' and how to protect one's Shi'a identity while aspiring to emigrate or relocate. With respect to all of these indicators of middle class life, Bilgrami promised the audience a precise idea of 'what all to give up and what all to emulate' to ensure a life in peace and *zukunft* (calm) 'despite the demands of modern times' (VCD 1, 11:30).

- 35 There is more to this insistence on *akhlaq*, as becomes increasingly apparent throughout the *majlis* series. For example, in his third lecture, Bilgrami complains that some of the people who listen to his *majalis* apparently have musical ring tones on their mobile phones and then he makes an interesting remark about social status and class distinction,
- Music is forbidden in Islam. If you ever listen to music, well, *don't complain, don't complain then*. Listen carefully! Four days have passed since I arrived in Bombay. *Five days* perhaps. Day in, day out, my phone rings, I keep meeting poor people. All of them have one request: 'Maulana, I am troubled, I have this *problem*, that *problem*.' I regularly reply: oh come on my friend, [leave it], at least in Muharram, at least in the month of Imam Husain. . . . Whenever you encounter troubles, then you have to *check* yourself, *check*: '*am I doing something wrong?*,' is there a chance that I myself have done something wrong? Everybody should check first themselves, then their family, their relations, their talk and their actions. . . . There is a simple method, everybody can use it, men and women, even labourers and watchmen. I myself check everyday . . . and if you want to know, *if you really want to know*, . . . then first check yourself, check 24/7! (VCD 3, 28:00, emphasis in original)
- 36 This excerpt and similar remarks in subsequent *majalis* reveal the flip side of an ethical life imagined purely in terms of propriety, which Saavala (2010: title) fittingly termed 'middle-class morality.' Considering the example of Hyderabad, she argues that
- the central moral predicament of the Indian middle classes is not how to justify one's own privileged position, because they do not feel a need for such a justification in the absence of a universal moral code. Rather, the main moral issue at stake is how to defend one's own position as 'one of us,' how to be on a par with one's status equals by pointing out the moral differences between 'the poor' and oneself as a middle class person. (Saavala 2010: 118)
- 37 Associating poverty with moral misconduct is not uncommon in India and elsewhere. However, with respect to an Islamic cleric, it is nonetheless surprising, given Islam's central theological concern with social justice. Indeed, Bilgrami's emphasis on each individual's responsibility for the minutiae of his or her conduct is driven by a political economy of guilt that helps him to reinterpret the key Islamic commandment of equality and social justice in favour of a narrow middle class politics of the self: 'If we do not implement this . . . how can we be called Hussaini? . . . Change your life, change it! Kerbala means revolution, but [most precisely] a revolution in one's own life. Revolutionise yourself!' (VCD 3, 39:00).
- 38 In sum, Abid Bilgrami not only mimics the linguistic practices of his middle class audience (a distinct style for which he is well known) and focuses his rhetoric on iconic consumer items, he precisely addresses the material sensitivities of the aspirational classes in Lucknow and elsewhere. Ultimately, Bilgrami naturalises privilege and limits social responsibility by effectively blaming poor people for their own predicament. If one were to assist them, one would effectively encourage them in their bad ways. Thus, he promotes a model of upward social mobility in which ethics are reduced to a code of propriety, a list of moral do's and (especially) don'ts for individual conduct.
- 39 Bilgrami's approach is such a strong innovation of mainstream Islamic perspectives on social justice, solidarity and charitable obligations that it is not surprising that tensions have erupted regarding the extent to which his advice is being followed. The organisation that invited Bilgrami to Wazirganj continues to distribute food to the poor every year on one of the first days of Muharram, awards stipends to deserving Shi'a students, and runs a blood donation camp that receives about 60 donations before and after each of Bilgrami's programs. But while some people who have attended them merely appreciate

that Bilgrami's *majalis* have a clear structure, a 'modern style' as one visitor told me, a refreshing alternative to the ritualistic approach of other orators, there also is my friend who left his wife in part because of arguments about which practices were proper enough to label their young family as 'educated rather than poor,' as he once framed it. Since then, he has fancied books on divorce. Other people fully commit to and happily embrace the theory that poverty is of no concern to them, that individual propriety is key, and that poor people themselves 'have to check themselves, check: am I doing something wrong?'

- 40 So far, this narrow focus on propriety remains an exception in the wider Shi'a clerical landscape of Lucknow, and even Bilgrami's most ardent followers acknowledge that other clerics are more influential. Broadly speaking, these clerics either pursue a project of identitarian groupism (exemplified by the politics of Maulana Kalbe Jawwad), aesthetic refinement (most celebrated by Maulana Agha Roohi but also discernable in many smaller, traditional neighbourhood *majalis*), or social reform (propagated by Maulana Kalbe Sadiq and his associates). None of them breaks as clearly with traditional rhetoric as Bilgrami, nor do they address a specific class base in their considerable following. But all strive to attract the newly rich, not least to secure their own income; consequently, the considerable impact of Bilgrami's innovations on the emerging Shi'a middle class in Wazirganj suffices to make the establishment nervous, as several of those mentioned above admitted in private conversation. In fact, I believe this was the main reason for Kalbe Jawwad's intervention in the aftermath of the 'Wazirganj Terror Attack' and its subsequent escalation in the first place, as argued above.
- 41 A second reason, however, is the fact that Bilgrami's middle class morality also easily took on sectarian overtones in Wazirganj, where most of the poor people are Sunnis and Shi'a lead the scramble for upward social mobility. Although it may not have been his intention, his theology is particularly susceptible in this social context to sectarian instrumentalisation. Many people on the Sunni side with whom I spoke 10 months after the attack on his *majlis* explicitly referred to the rising real estate prices and diminishing rent markets in Wazirganj to justify it. Although these types of complaints were at least partly motivated by Sunnis' competing business interests rather than concerns for poor people (an aspect discussed more fully in Susewind, forthcoming), the complaints demonstrate that Bilgrami, who rose to local prominence in an intra-sectarian competition over what it means to be Shi'a in contemporary times, began to influence inter-sectarian relations through the entanglement of sectarian identity with other axes of social difference.

## Understanding sectarian conflict

- 42 This entanglement of religion and class has wider implications for the study of intergroup violence in contemporary urban India, implications with which I will conclude this discussion. On one hand, the 'Wazirganj Terror Attack' cannot be understood in isolation from the local politics and the political economy in which it occurred. Nor can it be understood without considering the business rivalry between Nammu and Doctor over a lucrative segment of Lucknow's booming real estate market: without the threat that growing Shi'a wealth poses to Sunni political dominance in the neighbourhood, the 'Wazirganj Terror Attack' would likely not have happened. This reinforces mainstream scholarship that seeks to explain communal and, by extension, sectarian violence in India

through political instrumentalisation and economic incentives (Brass 2003, Varshney 2002, Wilkinson 2005).

- 43 On the other hand, I have argued that such political and economic calculations are underpinned by cultural and religious idioms that nurture and sustain those calculations over time. Unfortunately for Nammu, his conflict with Doctor became entangled in the wider social and moral dynamics that were expressed more within the Shi'a community of Wazirganj than between Shi'a and Sunni. In recent years, a reformist perspective on middle class morality has gained prominence in Wazirganj, a variation of Shi'ism that reduces Islamic ethics of social justice to a checklist for individual propriety. This middle class morality quickly became clothed in sectarian overtones because most poor people are Sunni and simultaneously challenged the established Shi'a clerical hierarchies that have so far resorted to differed moral registers, thus drawing the attention of state-level politics to an otherwise local problem.
- 44 The 'Wazirganj Terror Attack' therefore demonstrates that the rapid discursive and political escalation of violent conflict between groups can often only be understood by deeply examining the rivalries and contestations that occur within groups. Moreover, we saw that intergroup violence may well emerge from instrumental calculations which appear stringent in retrospective reconstruction—but that these calculations are fallible in lived practice.
- 45 Finally, when close attention is paid to the reasons why miscalculations occur, we see that intergroup conflict is not exclusively (perhaps, not even primarily) a situation in which underprivileged, uneducated people are easily manipulated by vicious elites for political and economic gain. Local discourse in India still situates the middle classes as a clean and civilised counterforce to political and economic elites perceived to be corrupt and criminal on one hand and seemingly unruly popular politics on the other hand. Many Lucknowites attribute Shi'a-Sunni conflict to a lack of education and autonomy of the poor Muslims in the old city, people who have been exploited by unscrupulous political entrepreneurs. In contrast to these popular perceptions, however, is a growing body of academic literature that links upward social mobility to at times violent othering and argues that these links are frequently mediated through novel moral registers (Schielke 2009a, 2009b) and associated practices (Ahmad 2009, Ghassem-Fachandi 2012, Ring 2006, Verkaaik 2004). These types of connections are not necessarily new phenomena. In Lucknow, the links can be traced back to the early 20th century when sectarian clashes first began and were financed by the emerging business class of the time (Hasan 1997). Reeves (1997: 221) suggested that from the very beginning, 'urban concerns [such as poverty and development] may have been displaced onto the 'sectarian' because of the class position[s] of Shi'a and Sunni groups' (cf. Gooptu 2001, Jones 2012). Seen through the prism of the 'Wazirganj Terror Attack,' there is no difference today: group violence may not be ancillary but indeed integral to the processes of social change in contemporary North India.

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## ABSTRACTS

On 16 January 2013, a Sunni real estate developer opened fire at a Shi'a religious assembly in Wazirganj, a mixed neighbourhood in old Lucknow, India, killing one and injuring two. At its core, this was a business rivalry gone awry, but was soon labelled the 'Wazirganj Terror Attack' by Shi'a activists. Demonstrations were staged, politicians were arrested, and religious gatherings were invigorated. Based on 17 months of ethnographic fieldwork, this paper considers why the attack took place and why it escalated. The political economy of real estate and local politics are argued to have motivated the attack, but the attackers miscalculated and lost control of the incident. The subsequent escalation can only be understood in light of Shi'a clerical competition over new moral registers and an emerging middle class morality that replaces ethical concern for solidarity with narrow codes of 'proper' conduct. This underlines the importance of intra-group contestation to intergroup conflict, and the limits of purely instrumentalist explanations of sectarian violence.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Muslims, group violence, instrumentalism, middle classes, morality, India, Lucknow

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